

The Creature's Creation: Is Art Helpful to Faith?

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Some years ago I encountered a young Jewish art historian who was doing his doctoral dissertation on the sculpture of the great 14th century Romanesque Church of Saint-Pierre at Aulney in France.¹ We were both photographing the church in the golden light of a winter afternoon. It turned out that we shared an obsession. As he put it, "I can't pass up a church." If one is traveling in France and is, as he was, knowledgeable about the Romanesque riches so densely scattered throughout the provinces, such an obsession entails a lot of stopping. Later, the young man confessed that the obsession had even led to the breakup of a love affair. He had no patience for anyone who was content to sit in the car while a church lay unknown before them. What if it contained glories!

The next evening we had dinner together, and our conversation was indicative of the peculiar status of Christian art. When my new acquaintance discovered that I was a theologian and that I was particularly interested in studying how Romanesque art and architecture illustrated the Augustinian-Anselmian character of the faith of the early Middle Ages – with its profound pessimism about the human condition apart from grace – the conversation sent him into a mood of self-reproach and even to consideration of abandoning his dissertation topic. "You," he said, "know why you're here." But what was he doing there, living in France, becoming more and more of a francophobe, yearning for his homeland but unable to resolve to leave? Putting thousands of kilometers on his unreliable car, he was kept poor and lonely by the compelling fascination he felt for Romanesque, but the faith which the art so profoundly expressed he did not share.

It was a great evening. He was the first fellow Romanesque madman I had met. Late into the night we pored over maps, swapping references, comparing impressions. "Have you seen? Don't miss . . ." And so on. Though he had been on a three year pilgrimage, had "devoured" churches like a religious fanatic, his God was the art of an

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alien religion, and he was not at peace. However, his ambiguous relationship to the art was not merely personal and idiosyncratic; it is endemic to the very nature of "Christian" art itself.

One need not be an Old Testament legalist to be disquieted by the formidable impediment to all visual art established, by the second commandment - a prohibition not only against graven images but also against the production of "any likeness." The commandment is troubling, even if a Pauline Christianity can "handle" it with the realization that in Christ "all things are lawful to me."

The prohibition against art was an attempt by ancient Israel to undercut pagan idolatry, but it was never totally successful. The use of idols at no time completely ceased, at least in pre-exilic Israel; also, it became obvious that graven images were only the symptom of the disease of idolatry - i.e., the worship of the creature instead of the creator. We don't need stone idols in order to be idolatrous.

As Paul taught, prohibitions do not eradicate sin; indeed, they often incite it. Just as celibacy is not the answer to the sins of the flesh, so prohibitions against art will not turn human hearts toward the one true God. If we embrace the Augustinian maxim "Love God and do anything you want," then the decision concerning art will be resolved not by legalism but in freedom. We are not slavishly bound to ancient prohibitions.

Nevertheless, the second commandment, if only because of the unique place of the Decalogue in the faith of Israel, old and new, gives us a solemn warning. Nor can we ignore the fact that crude idolatry has been and is practiced in the Christian church. Wherever the icon or the image is venerated or "revered," those who do so come close to the practice of idolatry. In Greece, I'm told, many Byzantine icons have been literally "defaced" by the pious who fleck off little pieces of the "holy" object (particularly about the eyes) and keep them as sacred relics. Nor can we ignore the warning implicit in the iconoclasm that has run deep in church history - in the thought of Origen, Bernard of Clairvaux, Savonarola, Calvin, Barth and others. "All things are lawful to me" but to complete the quote, "not all things are helpful." This finally is the issue: Is visual art truly "helpful" to faith?

The earliest development of "Christian" art is instructive. We cannot know with certainty on what basis the clearly non-Pauline legalistic Roman church of the late second and early third centuries flouted the second commandment and came to permit religious funeral art. But from the period of the early catacombs on, church art flourished. The simple, rather naturalistic, impressionistic style of the early catacomb paintings was taken over from the surrounding Roman culture. This cultural dependence is closely paralleled in the style of much of the theologizing of the second century. To the Christian, the catacombs are deeply moving, and one's feeling for the

early church is enriched by these simple wall paintings. However, the “power” of this art is not in the greatness of the art itself, but in its historic association. Moreover, it is ironic that the style of the early catacomb paintings is identical to that of the grossly pornographic wall paintings discovered at Pompeii. The first Christian painters were decorators and illustrators; they did not create a new style to express the radical new faith. Early Christian art often copied purely pagan themes and simply “Christianized” them - an attempt to put new wine in old wineskins.



With the emergence of Constantine, a new, anti-classical style found official patronage. An expressionistic, abstract and rigidly frontal art, it was apparently Constantine's preferred style, as the many portraits of him indicate. This non-naturalistic style provided the “natural” expression of a church whose faith and theology focused not on the world and humanity as they presently appear, but as they will be when the divinizing work of Christ is complete.

Early Byzantine art is the art of a transfigured universe. Christ became what we are that we might become what he is (Athanasius). Such art is the art not of mere illustration. With the emergence of early Byzantine art, we are confronted not with crudely charming illustrations which, by virtue of their special place in Christian memory, have a “magic” that moves us; here we have an art of such aesthetic power and genius that it grasps the beholder quite apart from any history-related sentiment we might feel.

To the legalistic objections against Christian art raised by such figures as Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria, and Origen, the early church had responded, in effect: Why should we allow another individual's scruples to inhibit our liberty? The first flowering of this liberty was early Byzantine. As Walter L. Nathan has observed, the art rejected by these three church fathers was not the “entirely new pictorial language” of a mature Christian art but the Christian art of their time, which had “borrowed freely” from the late classical pagan tradition. One could wonder how they would have reacted, for example, to the Byzantine glories of Ravenna in Italy.

It is not surprising that a dispute over the question of art developed in the early church. But especially when a mature Christian art appeared, the question changed from one of whether such an art *should* be attempted to one of what to make of an art that has, *de facto*, been produced. Is it to be judged as a valid or an invalid exegesis of Scripture? Or is it, in legalistic fashion, to be denied consideration on an *a priori* basis?

If we conclude that we will not dogmatically refuse even to view religious art, or we find that we are unable to avoid viewing it, and if in viewing it we are grasped by its

beauty and witness, then a posteriori we are compelled to grant that such an art makes a claim. Once we experience the power of Christian art to probe the meaning of faith, then literal obedience to the second commandment will be an obedience we find impossible to render gladly. The second commandment becomes an arbitrary requirement that contradicts our faith experience.

Radical iconoclasm has, in my judgment, a shameful history. Our puritanizing forebears, for example, were often guilty of the willful destruction of art, leaving many magnificent sculptures in Europe terribly mutilated. Such destruction is a grotesque testimony to the ugliness of censorship. Are former generations not to be allowed to speak to us of their faith?

Or perhaps we are to adopt the position that though Christians in the past may have produced examples of art that glorified the incarnate Christ by giving aesthetic concretization to the more abstract words of Scripture, it is regrettable that they did so. We will not destroy anything so beautiful, but let us hope that no one ever creates such work again! Iconoclasm is faced with insuperable problems once a great Christian art makes an appearance. Either it must, in leaden legalism, refuse to look or, having looked, it must show that no Christian art has ever truly glorified God.

Many of my students have told me that it was not until we studied Byzantine or medieval art that they were able to develop a genuine feel for the theology of these periods. A historical theology focusing on periods in which Christian art was a crucial element in the church's proclamation ignores at its peril a detailed understanding of that art.

To argue that the invisible God cannot be made visible is to ignore the fact that we have seen the glory of God shining in the face of Jesus, that God reveals himself through the concrete, through things that he is not — i.e., through his acts. If God has become a human being; why should the spoken word be the only means by which we can point to Christ?

Yet there is still that curious fact which we noted at the outset. Great religious art can and does stand on its own, quite apart from its origins in theology, and it has aesthetic power even for the unbeliever. Is this not perhaps the greatest danger in Christian art — that the art itself has an aesthetic power which may make it a rival to the God it proclaims?

To answer this question adequately would require setting it in the context of an entire theology of culture, but we can briefly indicate the primary points of such a theology and how it would encompass a theology of aesthetics.

As creatures made in the image of the triune God who creates *ex nihilo*, human beings have the capacity for creativity. Our creativity mirrors the creativity of God. God creates *absolutely*, from nothing. Human beings, for their part, are capable of bringing

into being, from the world that God has given us, new things that did not exist before. That which did not exist before human beings made it we call culture. Of course, we are limited in what we can create by the structures of the world. We can do only what is possible given the nature of the world, but we are privileged to contribute to the richness of our own existence by our creative acts.

Despite sin, we are the creatures ordained by God to create new possibilities of existence for ourselves. Human beings bring into being, out of innumerable possibilities for human existence, cultural modes that shape our very humanity. We are the only creatures who creatively contribute to our own being.

It is the Christian hope that even though cultures and civilizations rise and fall, what they accomplish will not be lost. As they achieve, in various degrees, the possibilities inherent in their basic stylistic premises, their creative contribution, to the development of humanity is not despised by God. God is not our jealous rival. God loves not only what he creates but also what the creature creates. The Kingdom of God is a cosmopolitan kingdom in which the diverse cultural achievements of humanity will contribute to the richness of its life. The creation of humanity was not completed in the garden; it was barely begun. The completion of humanity will come when God determines that we have finished the work he but started in the garden.

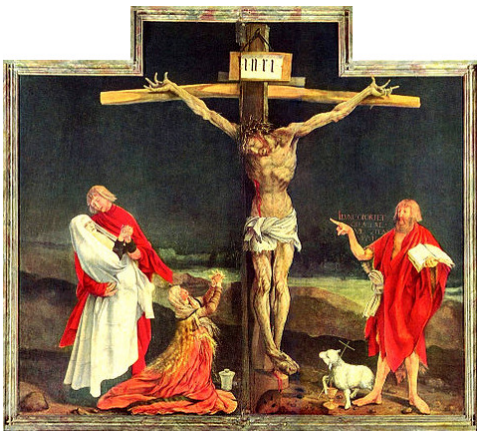
If we are fellow workers with God in the creation of a fully achieved humanity, then the problem suggested above - that art in praise of God can stand on its own and be beautiful even to the eyes of the unbeliever - should not surprise us. Nor should it alarm us. The glory of art - that it can call from us responses far beyond the conscious intention of the artist - is one of the gifts of God. If there is a "danger" in art, it lies not in the fact that art is somehow corrupting, but in the fact that it is so wonderful. Art is not under the rigid control of its maker; like the creation itself, it has autonomy. A work of art is, in one sense, always ideological; that is, it displays the perspective of the artist and the age. But once created, it stands as a creation which, like God's creation, reverberates into new possibilities that could not have been foreseen.

Just as secular art in one sense gives glory to God by virtue of its very existence as it contributes to the manifold wonder and glory of creation - even if the artist does not acknowledge the creator - so also Christian art which intentionally points to God contributes to the beauty of creation and can be perceived as beautiful even to unbelief. The same is true also of Christian literature, music and architecture, and it is not to be lamented. The possibilities within the created order are radically open.

The success of the Protestant Reformation was due to the fact that reformation was an idea whose hour had come. When Martin Luther first surfaced, there was instant, widespread support for reform, especially in northern Europe. Of course, the motives were not solely theological; political, economic and philosophical factors were

also involved. But the basic outline of Luther's radical Augustinianism appealed to a large audience quite prepared to hear it.

A great artistic flowering of Germanic art took place immediately preceding, and in part continued into, the Reformation period – the culmination of the so-called northern “renaissance.” It was an art that virtually prophesied Luther. The north produced a remarkable cluster of genius: Bosch (c. 1453-1516), Grünewald (c. 1470-1528), Dürer (1471-1528), Cranach (1472-1537), and other fine painters of only slightly lesser power. All of these artists shared in a “Lutheran” vision of humankind totally dependent on grace.



Perhaps the most Protestant painting ever achieved is Grünewald's crucifixion panel on the Isenheim altarpiece, finished in 1515, two years before the Reformation was launched. It is not at all that Grünewald later developed Lutheran sympathies. In this painting the elongated finger of John the Baptist points in naked objectivity from the Scriptures to the mangled, gigantic Christ; the painting bears the inscription, “He must increase but I must decrease.”

In a single image Luther's Reformation is summarized. The proclamation of the church must not focus on itself but must be grounded in Scripture, must point to the passion and, as the rest of the altarpiece demonstrates, to the incarnation and resurrection. The figures of the Marys contorted by grief, with the Virgin supported by the mourning apostle, reveal an understandable human response to the death of the beloved Jesus. However, the task of the church is not to re-enact their grief; the church's task is the objective witness of John, symbolized by his impassivity and the pointing finger. It is interesting that Karl Barth, who argued rather unconvincingly against Christian art, expressed great admiration for this painting. The painting's Protestant power seems to have overwhelmed the theologian's puritan principles.

It is deeply ironic that the Reformation should have been accompanied by the virtually prophetic painting of the North, and yet the iconoclastic tendency implicit in the very motto *Sola Scriptura* would close out the era of great Protestant painting before the middle of the 16th century. Writes Charles P. Cutler in *Northern Painting* (Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1968):

... art as a vital expression of the German spirit came to an end. No effort by Dürer or by any other painter could stem Protestant iconoclasm. When German artistic expression revived over a century later, it took the form of

music, which was acceptable to Protestantism as the old modes of painting were not.

The last truly great painter in the Protestant tradition was Rembrandt. Rembrandt's religious sentiments were Mennonite, quite out of phase with the prevailing Calvinist climate in Holland. Even had the Calvinist iconoclasm of the day not discouraged Christian art, it is unlikely that Rembrandt's vision of the poor and humble Christ would have provided an acceptable exegesis to a burgeoning capitalistic Calvinism. Interestingly, after years of obscurity, Rembrandt's greatness was "discovered" not by the church but by painters and critics who loved him more for his art than for the faith his art portrayed.

In turning toward a fundamentally iconoclastic faith, the Reformation paid a high cultural price, for despite the greatness of Protestant thought, literature and music, these are all profoundly abstract modes of culture. The balance provided by the visual is missing. The lack of the visually beautiful is evident in the way in which so much American church architecture, until it became too expensive, borrowed from European (Catholic) church styles, as witness the many Romanesque and Gothic anachronisms that dot the American landscape.

A context of beauty is a felt need, and since Protestantism has largely failed to produce visual beauty, it has had to borrow. With the exception of the New England meetinghouses which indeed do have a kind of rarefied puritan beauty, Protestantism in America has produced no significant styles of Christian architecture. This is equally true of religious art. We are no longer seriously inhibited by Protestant iconoclasm, but the wellsprings are dry. Protestant art as it has appeared in churches (Sunday school literature, posters, bulletins, Bible illustrations, etc.) has been either derivative or decorative and superficial.

Of course, with or without the support of the churches, great art has flourished since the Reformation. Christian lovers of art are still able, depending on how far one can stretch a point, to see "spiritual" dimensions in an art which is now largely secular. It is unlikely that things will change in the foreseeable future. This situation is not an unmitigated disaster; it is precisely what our iconoclastic Protestant forebears strove for.

If the art lover can find value in Christian art of past eras apart from the God it celebrates, then the believer can give thanks to God for the beauty that the artist (believer or not) discovers and creates. But I must confess that the art my heart loves best is one that praises God directly, an art that holds out the promise that beauty and truth *are* finally one in the God who is the ultimate source of all beauty and truth.